

## Pressure on Mineta mounts

By Ann E. Marimow  
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As he tackles the tremendous task of tightening security at the nation's 429 airports, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta is under pressure from old friends and new foes.

Civil rights advocates in San Jose, the city where he launched his political career, are frustrated that Mineta can't save the jobs of hundreds of Bay Area airport baggage screeners who could be fired because they are not U.S. citizens. They say the man who fought for an apology and reparations for the World War II internment of Japanese-Americans should be doing more to help the predominantly Filipino screeners.

But when Mineta came out against racial profiling at airports, he drew the ire of the right. Conservative columnists called Mineta -- the only Democrat in the Bush cabinet -- "dangerous" and urged the president to dump him as transportation secretary.

In addition, Mineta's prediction last fall that the Transportation Department would not be able to meet Congress' deadline to screen all checked baggage for explosives drew criticism from more moderate Republicans and even some Democrats on Capitol Hill. Within days of the disclosure, he retracted the comment.

Mineta's spokesman, Leonardo Alcivar, said the transportation secretary was too busy to comment. But Alcivar said Mineta is balancing many competing interests.

### Civil rights champion

"Nobody has championed civil rights more than the secretary, but his primary responsibility is to enforce the law," said Alcivar. "The role of a cabinet secretary is to serve the president."

Since Sept. 11, Mineta -- who was San Jose's mayor before representing Silicon Valley in Congress for two decades -- has become a central figure in the Bush administration's efforts to strengthen domestic security. The country's first-ever shutdown of air travel and the rollout of new security measures that followed have moved him into the spotlight.

Mineta, 70, is responsible for building the new Transportation Security Administration, which will be bigger than the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration and Border Patrol combined.

He receives daily intelligence reports at 5 a.m. and often works until 10 p.m. Mineta put off hip replacement surgery scheduled a few days after Sept. 11 until late January and continued to work via cellular phone from a hospital bed.

Under the aviation security act Congress passed last fall, Mineta's agency is responsible for taking airport security out of the hands of private companies. The estimated \$6.7 billion transition includes hiring a new federal workforce of 30,000 baggage screeners by Nov. 19 and having enough explosives-detection machines in place by Dec. 31.

The House Transportation Committee's ranking Democrat, James Oberstar of Minnesota, a longtime friend of Mineta, said Mineta is well-positioned to deal with the transition because of his experience on the committee. Mineta's main focus in Congress was on transportation, including two years as committee chairman before he retired in 1995.

"Norm is the first one who is not a trainee," said Oberstar, who has worked with every transportation secretary since 1966 and has talked with Mineta at least once a week since Sept. 11. "He exuded this confidence, command of the issues and unflappable countenance."

Still, Mineta's high-profile role and political past have made him the target of attacks from conservative columnists and publications like the National Review.

Conservative pundit Ann Coulter and others jumped on Mineta's remarks on "60 Minutes" that passengers shouldn't be subject to "racial profiling" -- extra scrutiny at airports on the basis of ethnicity or national origin alone.

"Let the record reflect that among President George Bush's dazzling team of advisers, the only stink-bomb is the one Democratic holdover from the Clinton administration," Coulter wrote in February. "It is absolutely contemptible that Bush will not rid us of this scourge."

Coulter implied that Mineta's experience at an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II shaped his opposition to profiling.

More than 50 Congress members reacted to Coulter's column by writing a letter to Bush in support of Mineta.

Mineta defends computer-assisted passenger profiling, his spokesman said, which includes a passenger's travel plans and patterns.

"People on the right are not making that distinction," Alcivar said.

### **Friends disappointed**

In more subtle ways, Mineta's role in overseeing the new aviation security law is a source of frustration to some of his longtime Bay Area allies.

``Many of us are very disappointed that he's not able to influence and provide greater leadership," said Northside Community Center President Ben Menor, who first met then San Jose Vice Mayor Mineta in 1970. Requiring screeners to be citizens is ``a serious action against our immigrants and their civil rights."

A broad Bay Area coalition of Asian and Pacific American, Latino, African-American, religious and labor leaders have formed a coalition to fight the citizenship requirement.

More than 800 screeners at San Francisco and San Jose airports could lose their jobs this summer because they are not U.S. citizens.

Coalition co-chairs Menor and Dennis Chiu of Asian-Americans for Community Involvement in San Jose, are reluctant to criticize Mineta, someone they consider a mentor and hero.

They are proud of the San Jose native who rose from the ranks of the city council to become the first Asian-American to serve in a presidential cabinet. They also understand that Mineta is constrained by the law and the Bush administration's support for the requirement.

Still, they are frustrated that the man enforcing the law is someone they count as an advocate for civil rights.

``I was prepared to be frustrated when he joined the administration because I knew his arms would be tied to a certain degree," said Chiu. ``But I hope he will speak out as an independent voice for civil rights."

Mineta has said he is working with the Immigration and Naturalization Service to be as lenient as possible in helping qualified screeners become citizens before the deadline. But he's been quick to add that there is no way to deviate from the law.

``This is not about a lack of understanding the important role that immigrants play in our country," said Mineta's spokesman Alcivar, adding that the INS makes the final decision on naturalization applications.

``We don't want to give the impression that we're passing the buck, but all we can really do is work within the existing law."

Still, the coalition wants Mineta to push harder to change the law and to use his authority as a cabinet member to lobby the INS.

The coalition says the citizenship requirement is unfair because it singles out baggage screeners. National Guard troops who have patrolled U.S. airports do not have to be citizens.

``The frustrations people are feeling are real," said Silicon Valley Rep. Mike Honda, a longtime friend of Mineta who is working to help screeners in Congress.

But, he added, Mineta is ``being judicious in not overstepping his office."

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*Mercury News Staff Writer Aaron Davis contributed to this report. Contact Ann E. Marimow at [amarimow@sjmercury.com](mailto:amarimow@sjmercury.com) or (650) 688-7531.*

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